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ABSTRACT

Literary scholars like Lynn Bloom consider truly private diaries as "bare-boned" works which are "written with neither art nor artifice." In 1995, a "pile of bones" arrived at one person's door delivered by Federal Express. They were the bones of her great aunt Annie Ray--fragments of the diary she kept from 1881 to 1885, the years she homesteaded in the Dakota territories with her husband, Charley, a blacksmith who worked up and down the West. Maybe because these diaries belonged to a relative, or because the relative wondered how Annie spent her days alone on the high prairie, or because Annie writes to a relative at a time when the recipient of Annie's diary has also begun keeping a diary, or maybe for all of these reasons, the diaries' recipient finds herself engaged in a project of dual discovery--finding a privileged place for private diaries and fulfilling her duty to Annie's memory. When Annie writes of her lonesomeness, the relative places herself on that empty plain and waits for the mail with her, reading about how the fiction that Annie read reminds her of "the heartache, suffering, and pain" of her own life. The paper suggests that a diary is not a narrative, it is a testimony and, unlike a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, testimony is raw and unassimilated, and the best the relative/reader can do is to witness Annie's testimony. (CR)

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Jennifer Sinor
Waiting for the Words of Annie Ray
April 2, 1998, Chicago, Illinois

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Bone

I am a saguaro, rib thrust gray
against blue hot sky.

I am

a polished jaw bone, teeth white
against the grass.
I have become all that I see:
an elegant bone, gnawed clean,
leaving only bone the end,
bone the beginning,
bone the skyline.

I am told by literary scholars like Lynn Bloom, that truly private diaries are "bare-boned" works which are "written with neither art nor artifice." According to her they are not self-coherent or reflexive; they "march along chronologically" and, I would supply for her, are boring. Truly private dairies, for Bloom, fail to speak in unmediated ways to the public, therefore they occupy the lowest rung of the diary hierarchy she creates. As opposed to writers of "diary literature" who tell dramatic stories in linear ways, the halting words and pieces of the private diary writer are worth little time and space.

Three years ago a pile of bones arrived at my door delivered by Federal Express. They were the bones of my great great aunt Annie Ray--fragments of the diary she kept from 1881 to 1885, the years she homesteaded in the Dakota territories. Maybe because these dairies belonged to a relative and there is blood involved, maybe because I wonder how she spent her days alone on the high prairie, maybe because she writes out to me at a time in my life when I have begun keeping a diary, or maybe for all these reasons I find myself engaged in a project of dual

recovery--that is of finding a privileged place for private diaries and fulfilling my duty to Annie' memory. What I worry about--what I furiously write against--is the fear that someone will mistake these bones for the mundane scribblings of a busy woman rather than the skyline that they are.

How do I even begin to tell you about Annie? Which fragments do I choose to share, here, and what am I hoping to say about them. In the back of my mind is the remembrance of the letter my Great Aunt Billie attached to Annie's bones when she first sent them to me. A letter asking for half the royalties when I publish. While my Aunt's optimism was both encouraging and amusing, what concerned me more was her willingness to turn Annie's bones into a commodity. Yet, here I am, passing out fragments to you in hopes they mold into a useable product in the end. Though Annie, herself, even in the midst of the writing process wrote about the utility of the writing product.

On December 7, 1882 she writes

It seems foolish for me to keep a memorandum of my uneventful days but I have little to do and might about as well do that as any thing and then it will be nice to read after a long time.

What I wonder about is whether Annie's intentions for her words went beyond her own late night revisiting. In 1975, Annie's niece Fannie decides to burn Annie's letters and diaries. She confesses her actions by beginning the letter with the word "unfortunately." I envision Fannie hunched in front of a black wood burning stove, holding the square metal door open, watching as the pages curl and writhe in the orange flame. more and more page are stuffed n the stove; their sheer thickness protecting her hand from the heat. At one point the fire is almost smothered by the weight of your words.

What arrived at my door three years ago were your bones that had escaped Fannie's hands. Fragments of an already fragmented story. Does Fannie read your intentions correctly when she concludes that you wanted to keep your words to yourself? She recovered them from

the bank safe you left them in. Did your words seek the safe or did they wait in that cool metal box to be saved? Maybe by me. At this point your words have escaped more than flames. They have escaped my Great Aunt Billie's censoring hand as well as my own initial inattention and failure to read beyond, because I, like Lynn Bloom, have been taught to admire figurative language, linear narrative, and coherent story. Your words still wait. What is my duty to them?

January 18, 1881

This is a beautiful warm day. Oh! That my life was beautiful, warm, and sunny too. It is such heartaching as this which makes people grow old before their time. It is bad enough to be separated from my husband, but not to hear from him for so long makes it ten times worse. I am so lonesome. But I am unwise to feel like this.

I think about you being alone in the Dakota Territory while your husband, Charley's, blacksmith work carries him up and down the far west. I know how vacuous the plains are, how your ears ache to hear any sound except the wind; how your eyes strain to make out any point of focus, any reference beyond the green flatness. I know how the tall summer corn threatens to overtake the houses and the highways, jumping the ditches and consuming the earth. The heavy wait for harvest.

There is no serenity in that kind of emptiness. I remember being lost one time in the western plains of Nebraska when I was in college. It was late spring and the corn was maybe six feet high. I had jogged too far away from my friend's farm and when I turned around I no longer knew where I was. All around me was corn, corn too high to see above, and flatness, unfaltering, unrelenting flatness. Sky and earth. There is nothing else out there; you have no way to get your bearings. And the wind pushed against me, so fierce and so ugly. I could not move. I have never been so alone. Even high atop the Rockies, on 14,000 foot peaks, choosing to stay behind while the others hike to a lake or a cave, even then I felt connected. Out on the plains it is only dislocation.

So, Annie, when you write of your lonesomeness I place myself back on that empty plain. And I wait for the mail with you, reading about how the fiction you read reminds you of "the heartaching, suffering, and pain" of your own life. Why do you ache so?

January 20, 1881

Morning Cloudy--PM pleasant. I felt very cross all forenoon. Everything I touched seemed to go wrong. Felt like scolding someone but did not and am glad of that. I do not think people are always to blame for their feelings so at times. I wonder if ~~Charley is thinking of me~~.

You crossed the last sentence out. One single line. A thin line so that I can still read what was written. Partly hoping. Partly knowing. Partly denying.

I remember being in third grade. My teacher says of course Santa Claus isn't real. I hold onto that information for days, like a piece of hard candy I stick it under my tongue. I finally ask my father, but my question arrives crossed out. I already know the answer. I fear for you--that you know only too well. You write as if you, too, are scared to learn the truth. Yet, the fact that you would even write those words indicates hope on your part.

January 21, 1881
Has been cold and blustering all day. The stage did not come. We have been singing hymns all evening and now the men are playing cards. Have not been very busy. Wrote and read considerable. And now must warm my feet and go to bed.

January 22, 1881

We did not get up until after 8 o'clock this morning and it was 9 when breakfast was ready. So I have been behind with the work and hurried all day. Had very poor bread. Do not know whether the flour or I am to blame.

It's the flour, Annie. It's the flour.

In reference to diary writing, Elizabeth Hampsten suggests that "[w]omen, by their own account, do all they can to keep stable the lives of others in their care; they work so hard to see that as little as possible 'happens' that their writing obliges us to look deeper, to the very repetitive daily-ness that both literature and history have schooled us away from."

So I begin to look beyond the repetition of the bread making, beyond passages like the one you write on July 30 of the same year:

Weather continues in the same with string winds, in the southwest. Have a slight headache. This forenoon I scrubbed, made bread and yeast and ironed. Have lain around nearly all pm. It is hardly worth my while to keep a diary. I have so little to note.

and I keep I thinking that something lives behind your headache, something that you can't scrub out, something that spoils your bread. And yet you won't disclose. Instead you write by omission, saying you ache but have little to say. What prevents you from speaking?

I realize I need to move deeper into your diary, abandoning my original plan of linear progression and looking, instead, for gaps, places where I sense that the bread, once again, is not rising.

August 23, 1881

It did not rain much last night. There are indications of rain this morning it is thundering both in the north and south, Walter dropped a few words last night which brought back to mind some olden memories which were it in my power I would blot out of my mind forever, I can not put it away from me. My heart aches with such bitterness and indignation and a sense of the wrong done me which can never be ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ones having ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ can never in anyway ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ for such a wrong. They have lost my confidence in mankind. I had too much confidence. How blind I was not to see through it all. Especially ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~...

Who is crossing these words out? Is it the overanxious hand of Fannie that I read, or have you chosen to hide these thoughts from the world? Who is in control? Because I keep a

diary, I know what it's like to lie to yourself. I know what it's like to be unable to see your inner thoughts living on the page. Yet, I keep feeling like I am creating the framework and asking you to mold to the edges, that I want too much to see my life in yours. How should I read the unreadable?

I need to find Fannie first before I can find you. Get a sense for all this burning and deleting. I call my Great Aunt Billie.

What I learn is that Fannie got religion late in life. Toward the end of her life, she took to calling my Great Aunt from her home in Florida. "Will God ever forgive me," she asked Billie, "will I ever be forgiven?" Fannie called Billie with the same question so many times and at such early hours in the morning that Billie's husband, Dean, simply started handing the phone to Billie whenever it rang before 6AM. "Will God forgive me?"

Then right before Fannie died, Billie got another call. Fannie was willing Billie her grave plot in the family cemetery in Bridgewater, South Dakota (home to Annie). Fannie was willing away her grave plot next to her uncle, her uncle Charley.

It seems Fannie no longer wanted to be buried next to her one and only lover. It seems Fannie feared the wrath of God. And rightly so. Even in today's world, an affair between an uncle and his niece is not taken lightly, related by marriage alone or not. The fact that Fannie was so much younger than

Charley or the fact that Fannie never married because of her love for Charley seems only to heighten the sting. Oh, Annie.

Does Charley ever know that late at night, alone in the claim shanty while he was off wroughting more than metal, you wrote things like: "Dear patient, generous Charley. For your sake I wish I was better. I will be better. To become worthy of you will be the main purpose of my life." Does he realize how sad you were and how he, more than the flour, was to blame. And

Fannie? Not the only one to bear the burden of blame.

Fannie wasn't even born in August of 1881 when you write, "I wish some things were different. They will have to be, sometime." I can only blame Fannie for omitting your anger and despair from you diary, not for causing it. At least not in 1881. I return to your words.

I pass through the blizzard of 1881 and then through the assassination of President Garfield (you report his death only one day after it occurs). You mention Mother Shipton's prophecies so I visit the rare books collection on the seventh floor of the library and read her predictions. Still no help. Charley comes and goes. You suffer from rheumatism, neuralgia, and then cancer. Your closest neighbors have a baby that you visit from time to time. I know what you do not know then--that you will never have children, that you will be barren. Did you want to then? The man who shot Garfield is hanged. Still nothing. You bake countless loaves of bread, wash untold pieces of clothing, and you end almost every entry with loneliness, heartache, or ailment. August 18, 1882 is a good example:

Very warm. C. is working on the R.R. I do not feel well at all. I had a dreadful headache last night. I picked over and washed a lot of dried apples today. What a different kind of life this is from what I used to think my life would be. the loneliness is sometimes almost unbearable. I don't seem as though my life is of any use at all.

I learn little more about why your heart aches, yet I can guess.

On August 22, just four days later, my guesses are confirmed. You write about Charley, "[w]e had a long talk about a very painful subject this forenoon." You fall sick again and write more and more of bitter disappointment.

So when you write on October 11, 1882, only the word "nothing," I cry. Each time I read over that tiny word, I want to fatten it up, fill it out, explode it. Elizabeth Hamptsen tells me that

"private writings of women ask of us, if we wish to read them knowingly, a special inventive patience...'Nothing happened' asks that we wonder what, in the context of a particular woman's stream of days, she means by something happening."

Hampsten's words help me very little. Because you do not tell me that "nothing happened," rather you write "nothing."

December 28, 1882

.....I have been thinking over all the successes, disappointments, hope, fears, joys, and sorrow, pleasure and pain in the lives of my friends and myself. Take it all in all, I believe there is most of disappointment and pain in life.....How I wish I could lift the veil which hides my view nearly the whole of the one trial and disappointment in my life. I don't like to be uncertain and not know what to think. I would like to know all about the thing which troubles me. Will I ever know? Will I go to my grave with the longing to know more of that affair rankling in my heart?

That affair rankling in my heart. The one trial. The one disappointment. Do I need Great Billie to tell me that Charley was a lady's man? Do I even need to know about the affair he will start with his niece, Fannie, in a few years? Do I wonder now why you are sad?

And there is so much more, yet at this point I have no time. You're own obituary where you are barely mentioned. Charley's diaries written at the same time which record details of blacksmithing but never mention you. Photographs where you fade into the background, the only one dressed in black on a hot summer's day. And with each new fragment, each new bone, I am beginning to realize something that those who privilege diary literature seem to miss. And that is the fact that we cannot ask the same questions of you that we ask of May Sarton. Because you aren't writing a narrative. You are writing testimony. And unlike narrative which can be theorized and which has a beginning, middle, and an end, testimony is raw, inartuclatable, and unassimilated. As a process, testimony comes in fits and halts and requires someone to wait and witness. And maybe the best I can do at this point is what Shoshana Felman suggests the only thing an outsider to trauma can do, witness your testimony. So instead of demanding a neat

narrative, decoded and readily accessible, I want to learn to be content with your bones, bones that have escaped cremation and lie waiting for me to hold.

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